



LAND USE AND SMART GROWTH MANAGEMENT

Effective land use planning is essential for Massachusetts to have both a strong economy and a safe, high-quality environment. All too frequently, however, development has moved in random, haphazard patterns that treat land use and related environmental concerns as afterthoughts. Correspondingly, land use controls often are not well-coordinated between municipalities and regions, leading to decisions that serve one community's economic goals at the expense of another community's quality of life. Especially disconcerting, declining urban areas coupled with runaway sprawl move in a relentless downward spiral, steadily degrading community character while wastefully consuming huge tracts of open land. As Massachusetts faces a dawning new century, our economic and environmental health demand an approach that blends traditional land use controls with far-seeing growth management planning, knitting them into a strong yet flexible regional fabric. With a solid history of addressing the needs of individual municipalities and the regions they form, Massachusetts' regional planning agencies are poised to carry out this charge, working in concert with their member communities and state government.

Regional Planning Agencies See the Big Picture

Land use planning is a complex web of many other major planning concerns: transportation; economics; environmental quality; residential, commercial, and industrial development; and infrastructure. Furthermore, planning that transcends municipal boundaries is critical at the close of the twentieth century, as the results of lax or erratic controls are manifested in a chain of troubling realities: industrial migration, suburban sprawl, longer commutes between home and work, increased air pollution. Even if these realities can be mitigated, the conditions that created them are irreversible. Therefore, Massachusetts must increasingly rely upon creative regional solutions that re-craft problems into innovative possibilities for a twenty-first century in which:

Community zoning bylaws and land use decisions are consistent with community and regional master plans.

New development is designed to maintain community character, enhance quality of life, support a diversified economy, and minimize adverse impacts.

City and town centers are the vibrant focus of community life and local commerce.

Compact residential development, in pedestrian-oriented neighborhoods of diverse housing types, is created near employment or community centers.

Existing commercial and industrial centers are revitalized.

Key environmental assets such as wetlands, watersheds, and floodplains, are protected, restored, and enhanced.

A coordinated, multi-modal transportation system, economically and environmentally sound, moves people and goods safely, dependably, and efficiently.

Infrastructure is safe, reliable, and of high quality.

Massachusetts' RPAs are especially well-equipped to help their member communities and their regions realize these visions by encouraging expansive thinking, foresight, and cooperation, and by providing expert advice and services.

Regional Planning Agencies Save Money, the Environment, and the Economy

By scrutinizing the broad picture of land use and growth planning, RPAs work efficiently to coordinate various elements in different planning scenarios, thereby realizing maximum benefits. For example, an RPA saves money by recommending that a new shopping mall be built in an area currently supported by appropriate infrastructure, rather than where roads are already congested and new, expensive infrastructure will be required. Thoughtful land use planning also saves millions of dollars in environmental clean-up costs by helping to ensure that developments will not be placed in environmentally sensitive areas. And far-thinking land use planning by Massachusetts' RPAs creates jobs where they are needed, thus preserving tax bases for hundreds of member cities and towns across the commonwealth.

Regional Planning Agencies at Work: A Sampler of Land Use and Growth Management Planning

The Cape Cod Commission conducted capacity studies of Monomoy and the Outer Cape to determine how much growth the towns involved can accommodate without compromising their natural resources, municipal facilities, and community character.

The Metropolitan Area Planning Council was instrumental in creating MetroPlan 2000, eastern Massachusetts' first regional policy plan calling for concentrated development as an alternative to sprawl. It is being updated as MetroFuture.org.

The Montachusett Regional Planning Commission has been at the forefront of renewable energy efforts with a Wind Energy Conversion Systems (WECS) "windmill" zoning bylaw for its member community of Templeton.